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ABSTRACT

After discussing the demand for public accountability in Australian education, the first section of this paper treats the scope of accountability and details the responsibilities of a state minister of education, other key administrators, schools and teachers, and the national system itself. The second section examines what the public wants to know about the educational system regarding its context (historical/political, legal, economic, demographic, social, and technological); inputs (financial costs and expenditures); process (teaching performance); and student outcomes. The third section comments on methodologies for keeping the public informed, such as committees of inquiry and standing committees, and discusses monitoring methods and their difficulties. Systematic national or statewide testing programs are costly, define literacy and numeracy in limited ways, and may have undesirable backwash effects. The Australasian Cooperative Testing Program (ACAP) uses a diagnostic approach to help teachers understand and improve individual students' performance. The final section outlines strategies for improving public education accountability: (1) improving the statistical base and its analysis; (2) improving the system review process; (3) operating the system using a research and development approach; and (4) monitoring outcome through testing. (Seven references) (MLH)

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OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. 11

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION

A discussion paper

by
S.S. Dunn

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Canberra

June 1989

A note on the author

Before retirement in 1981, Syd Dunn had been full time Chairperson of the National Education Research and Development Committee for five years. Prior to that he was a Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Education at Monash University. He was for many years associated with the Australian Council for Education Research — first as a research trainee from South Australia, where he was a Primary teacher, and later as officer in charge of Test Division and then as Assistant Director.

He was a member of the Karmel Committee of Inquiry into Education in South Australia (1969-70) and a member and later Chairperson, of the SA Council for Education Planning and Research. He has acted as a consultant to the education systems in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. He has chaired the Research Committee of the College of Education, been a member of the College Council, and chaired the Policy Committee of the Victorian Chapter.

He is a Fellow of the Australian College of Education; of the Australian Psychological Society and of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences. In 1981 the Queen approved the award as an Officer of the Order of Australia for services to education.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author but he has benefited greatly from discussion with and comments on drafts from:

Dr Barry McGaw	Australian Council of Education Research
Dr Robert Broadbent	Executive Director of the Australian College of Education at the time this paper was in preparation
Dr Mal Hewitson	Brisbane College of Advanced Education
Dr Barry Thomas	Education Consultant and Chairperson, Victorian Chapter of Australian College of Education

The author expresses his thanks for their help.

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What is meant by Public Accountability of Education

1. The demand for accountability.

Eighteen years ago a distinguished US educator asserted:

The public has lost faith in educational institutions. The public has demanded that schools demonstrate that resources are being used 'properly'. But this has meant far more than mere financial accounting to ensure that funds have not been illegally spent or embezzled. What is demanded instead is that schools demonstrate that outcomes are worth the dollars investment provided by communities. In short what has been called for is a system of educational accountability. (Alkin, 1972)

Since then more and more States in the USA have adopted State-wide monitoring programs through which both student and teacher performance is assessed.

In Australia, the signs of similar trends grow. The former Labor Minister in Victoria, Mr Ian Cathie, commissioned a survey of numeracy and literacy levels of 10 and 14 year olds to be undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research in 1988. His successor, Caroline Hogg, in the months before this survey was undertaken said:

We are going to spend a fair bit of time this year trying to draw out questions of accountability. I reckon that's something that schools and teachers and the Ministry have not given enough thought to. We are a bit weak on the accountability side. (Hogg, 1988)

The Commonwealth Labor Minister, Mr John Dawkins, took a similar view when he claimed that we need to develop a method of reporting to the nation on how well our schools are performing against established goals.

Others have even more precise proposals. The Liberal Party Policy in Victoria calls for testing of all students in Years 3, 6 and 10 and the new Liberal-National Party government in New South Wales will begin implementing a similar policy in 1989.

Educators cannot stand apart from these developments or simply decry all attempts to develop and implement accountability procedures as 'educationally unsound'. It is essential that they join the discussion and define forms of accountability that they judge to be educationally sound and publicly acceptable.

2. Scope of accountability

Accountability is clearly linked with responsibility. As was mentioned earlier many institutions and individuals contribute to the education process - the media as well as the schools, parents and peers as well as teachers. However when public accountability in education is being discussed it is usually only the institutions created or regulated by governments - schools and colleges, TAFE Colleges, Colleges of Advanced Education and Universities, which are held responsible and therefore accountable for outcomes.

It is true that each institution and each individual educator could be considered as having an interested 'public' to which each is accountable but for the purpose of this paper discussion of public accountability will be confined to the schooling level (primary and secondary or K-12) which includes all of compulsory schooling and to 'system accountability' of two types namely:

(a) national accountability: how the schooling level systems, with Australia as the unit of analysis, can be seen as accountable; and,

(b) State accountability: how the schooling system within a State or Territory can be accountable.

'School or institutional' accountability and 'teacher' accountability are not the topics of this discussion. Individual schools and teachers are parts of the system but their specific audience is only a small part of the public in the sense the word 'public' is used in the phrase 'public accountability'. All educators are aware of how both Commonwealth and State government regulations and funding policies now influence the various levels of education - preschool, primary, secondary, tertiary. The governments therefore share responsibility for different aspects at different levels and assigning responsibility at any level becomes a complex issue. Within any State or Territory there are non-government schools as well as government schools, all of which are included in the discussion of the topic.

Much of current rhetoric for accountability emanates from the world of commerce and industry which values that particular type of accountability which is commonly applied to firms and industries, namely, one in which outcomes are expressed in economic terms only and firms and industries are judged by profits and share prices. Educators consider this purely economic model provides a simplistic

approach not appropriate to education because it ignores important educational outcomes. From their knowledge of evaluation methodology educators have learned to consider the importance of process and to judge on the basis of both intended and unintended outcomes in both the short and the long run.

If this evaluation approach is applied to commerce and industry a difference picture of accountability emerges. How should the public evaluate the tobacco industry? It has been financially very profitable but also caused lung cancer, the costs of which have to be met largely from the public purse. How can the individual suffering be costed? A chemical company may be polluting nearby streams leading to public cost. A law firm may be offering taxation advice which, even if not illegal, is not serving the interest of the public. In a monopoly workers and management may combine for their mutual benefit but at the expense of the public. Educators can accept an evaluation approach to education for public accountability but they are entitled to ask the business and commercial critics of schools to apply the same evaluation principles of public accountability to their business activities.

At the same time it is possible for governments to assign to schools tasks which educators know cannot be achieved, certainly not by all children. Performance targets can be set which reflect political desires rather than educational realities. There is a tendency for the public to keep adding responsibilities to schools without corresponding reduction in existing tasks. The profession needs to make clear its objections to such tasks.

However, once it is accepted that education systems can and should be held accountable for those activities for which they have accepted or been assigned responsibilities through proper procedures the key questions become:

(a) To whom and for what is the system responsible and how do the individuals and institutions within the system discharge their responsibilities as components of the system?

(b) How can the system provide the information needed by the public in a form that can be understood and at costs in time and money that are acceptable to the public?

Educators will recognise this clarification and data gathering procedure as a typical evaluation exercise with multiple audiences. Once the 'to whom' question is considered it becomes clear that society — that is the public to whom any report is addressed — comprises many groups

with differing and sometimes conflicting interests which influences data gathering and more particularly interpretation and judgment. In broad terms the public's interest in the 'for what' issue can be covered by two questions:

(a) How, within a given context, are the funds utilised and to what purpose? Understanding the context is crucial to making judgments. Fund usage includes financial accountability, but encompasses also input, such as resources used; processes employed; and outcomes, both intended and unintended.

(b) how well do the outcomes meet the immediate and future needs of the society where needs in this context are seen as being social as well as purely economic? This is the judgmental task.

Since the provision of information — its collection and interpretation — costs time and money, which could alternatively be used in the educational process, a trade off is necessary. The type of information gathered and its use has to be examined critically and justified. There is no point in gathering huge amounts of data which serve little or no useful purpose.

Australian education operates in a context of rapid changes — political, demographic, technological, economic and social changes. Schooling systems are expected to adjust to these changes. Before the public passes judgment, it needs to understand the contextual situation and the reasons for the responses to change made by those with educational responsibility. It is at this point that the current political structures and the roles and responsibilities of key individuals and groups in the system needs to be understood if accountability is to be linked with responsibility. While it would be possible to examine all the numerous responsibilities of individuals in the education system for the purpose of this paper - the roles of individuals of three key levels will be considered:

(a) the Minister;

(b) senior system administrators — led by the Director-General or the Chief Executive Officer in the Ministry; and,

(c) the principal and teachers at school level.

Since the legal, the main financial and most operational decisions are the province of the States the responsibilities of key individuals in the

state system will be examined first. Later their responsibilities as they relate to national system will be discussed.

3. Responsibilities of a State Minister of Education

In Australia States have the constitutional and major financial responsibility for schooling. The responsibilities of State Ministers of Education include:

(a) Interpret, and seek to have implemented, government policy as it affects the education portfolio. This responsibility poses several issues for accountability. Implementation of changes always poses problems and may become politically unpopular in which case the actions of the Minister are going to be evaluated primarily by political colleagues — the Premier, Cabinet, the government members and the Party. This political responsibility represents a major issue in the provision to the public of relevant (i.e. reliable and valid) information on which to evaluate the performance of the system. Favourable information will be made public but unfavorable reports may be suppressed or delayed. Implementation strategies raise issues about the responsibility of the Minister and those of the Director-General or Chief Executive. The 'Yes Minister' syndrome can operate in education.

(b) Obtain and allocate resources to portfolio agencies. It is important to recognise, especially in the short run, that the State Minister has limited freedom to manipulate resources. Salaries of teachers and other staff occupy a large percentage of the budget, with the number and type of teachers unable to be changed rapidly. The Commonwealth also makes funds available, sometimes for prescribed purposes which may not agree with the priorities of a State but which are almost impossible not to accept politically. The existence of resource agreements between the Commonwealth and the States is a significant change as these agreements embrace the rhetoric of accountability.

A major accountability issue here is to obtain and understand the necessary information in context, especially the State/Commonwealth context, so that any evaluation of resource allocation is related to real responsibility and control.

Also any judgments about evaluation of resource allocation will reflect value judgments about adequacy and equity. In the Australian context interstate and, within limits, international comparisons may be useful. However machinery for this complex task is very limited and efforts at making between State comparisons are not always welcomed.

Since the link between policies and resources is a ministerial responsibility it is Ministers who must be held accountable if they announce programs, often acceptable, but which fail or struggle along, because adequate resources were not provided.

(c) Check that portfolio agencies are operating effectively and efficiently within portfolio parameters. Here the Minister is in one sense acting on behalf of the public, to check that the system is operating effectively to achieve the goals of the elected government. The Minister is also protecting himself/herself.

The Minister obtains feedback on the system from many sources — senior staff, review committees, task forces, consultants, research branches, pressure groups. From an accountability perspective how much of this information should be made public? Major reports by committees of inquiry such as Beazley (WA) Blackburn (Vic.), and Keeves (SA), are published. This methodology as a form of public accountability will be commented on later.

(d) Foster coordination and cooperation between portfolio agencies and also with related departments. The system has many parts and if the component parts of a system are not working together harmoniously the system suffers. Recent years have seen various structural changes in State systems in an endeavour to strengthen coordination and cooperation. It is difficult for the public to obtain evidence on how effective the existing structures were and whether the changes have improved or will improve the

situation, especially if key officials are not committed to or do not understand the reasons for the changes. The committee of Inquiry by an 'expert' panel is one way of creating information for the public on the coordination of parts of the system.

(e) Development of new policies and programs and the modification of existing policies and programs. Obviously the Minister does not do this alone but uses the professional staff of the system as well as political advisors and party committees. But it is the responsibility of the Minister to see that policies are articulated to the public. The public is better served now than in the past but there is no tradition in Australia of strong debate on educational issues. The current debate on tertiary education with its Green Paper/White Paper approach has at least developed lively public discussion in academic circles. At State level the media maintains only a modest interest in most educational issues unless they are sensational.

No procedures for public accountability in education can be satisfactory if they focus on 'outcomes' alone. The State systems operate in a context and it is in that context the Ministers of Education have their responsibilities for which they should be held accountable. To judge them appropriately the public requires information it seldom possesses.

4. Responsibilities of key administrators

The term key administrators covers a range of important staff whose roles and responsibilities have been changing in response to structural alterations in the education system. In the last few years there have been several shifts of key staff upwards, sideways, early resignations and even an appointment and its withdrawal by the next Government before the officer (Director-General NSW) assumed office. These changes have occurred in most States and in the Commonwealth portfolio and include replacing educators with professional administrators. The reasons for such changes deserve study and comment in any attempts at public accountability since they raise issues about the responsibilities of Ministers vis-a-vis key administrators and are likely to erode public confidence in the system. Administrators' roles include:

(a) Advisory role: Education will suffer if senior administrators are seen as mere managers on behalf of the Minister. There is a management role but debates about goals, input, process and outcomes in the context of both the State and the nation need professional input. A Minister will receive advice from many sources and senior administrators should expect to be judged for the quality of their educational advice.

(b) Management and Coordination Role: Senior administrators have a number of extremely difficult tasks here. Programs initiated by the Commonwealth have to be integrated with State programs. Problems can arise between the management of the State schooling system and the State rules governing non-government schools. There are statutory bodies (e.g. Year 11 and 12 examination authorities) whose policies need to be consistent with those operating elsewhere in the schooling system. Interfaces have to be maintained with other parts of the total system, for example, TAFE and Higher Education institutions.

(c) Operational Role: It is normally these senior administrators who are responsible for operating the government schools. In this role they need information from the schools as parts of the system to carry out this role. The information gathered can be used also for accountability if it is made public. This issue is discussed later. It is worth noting that some procedures - inspection, State-wide testing imply little trust in the professionalism of teachers and inhibit diversity in the system.

(d) Communication with the Public: If the public is to develop trust in its education system then senior administrators must develop communication with the following groups:

- The Minister, the Government and the Opposition. The Minister is directly advised but it is important that both Government and Opposition understand educational options. This will help to prevent wild fluctuations in programs when Ministers or governments change.
- The professionals operating the system. Where major changes occur in curriculum or structures

making sure understanding occurs throughout the profession is essential. If not, teacher stress is certain.

- The public, and this includes parents, need to understand the reasons for change if they are to accept them.

One of the more appropriate methods of evaluating how well key administrators are discharging their responsibilities is the use of a committee of review methodology discussed later.

5. Responsibility of school and teachers

This article is not concerned with the evaluation of a particular school or an individual teacher. However schools and teachers are parts of the schooling system and, as such, evaluation information is needed on their performance as a group. Inspectorial systems of various types have been used for this purpose and are still supported by some members of the public. By structuring school councils in an appropriate manner and by delegating to councils appropriate authority with suitable guidelines a form of accountability is created, especially if each council publishes an annual report. Systematic school reviews at regular intervals with external as well as internal matters is another method of ensuring quality for the whole of the parts. Information gathered from a sample of schools is adequate for evaluation of the system. Using a sample does not solve the problem of what data to gather or the impact of the data gathering process on schools but a sampling approach is both less frightening to individuals and less costly for the public purse while still providing reliable information about the system.

Also basic statistical information can be gathered about a sample or about all schools which can be made public. In addition to the usual statistics on class size, pupil teacher ratio, other useful information about inputs, processes and outcomes, staff development could be collated, analysed, discussed and published.

6. Responsibilities within the national system

When the Commonwealth of Australia was created as a federal system legislative responsibility for education rested with the States but since then changes have occurred. Since 1975 the Commonwealth has funded

virtually all higher education and is now in the process of reorganising higher education into a unified national system. The Commonwealth has also created a National Board of Employment, Education and Training and invests large sums of Australian taxpayers funds in both capital grants to schools and in educational programs via resource agreements.

At the schooling level significant changes have occurred in the operation of such important national bodies as the Commonwealth Schools Commission, Curriculum Development Centre, Education Research and Development Committee. The Schools Commission has become part of the new National Board of Employment, Education and Training with less autonomy and, almost certainly, a lower profile in reporting on its activities to the public. CDC moved from being independent to being part of the CSC and now seems likely to become independent again with joint Commonwealth-State control. ERDC was disbanded. It is important that the Australian Council for Educational Research Inc. retains its independence and continues to play a critical role in examining and publishing information about educational issues in Australia.

Does Australia have a body which can accept responsibility for developing national goals and which can coordinate the activity of States-Territories as the operational components? If public accountability for the national system is to be achieved then it is essential to examine the responsibilities of the Commonwealth for schooling and how the Commonwealth Minister and Department discharge their responsibilities. Then in addition all the parts have to be evaluated as components of the whole. The Australian Education Council composed of all the State Ministers and the Commonwealth Minister is the only existing agency whom the public can hold responsible for this. Since the Commonwealth Minister made a statement on national goals discussions have led to agreements for greater co-operation and shared responsibility for CDC. For machinery it may look to bodies like ACER but responsibility rests with the Australian Education Council.

Discussion questions:

1. In any attempt at national evaluation how can the respective roles of the Commonwealth and the States be separated? Consider goals, input, process, outcomes?
2. In what major ways does the role of the Commonwealth Minister of Education differ from the State Ministers of

Education? How do these differences influence attempts to make each accountable to the public for his/her responsibilities?

3. If national outcomes are measured using tests of literacy and numeracy what problems exist if States are compared? What about comparisons of types of schools such as Government, Catholic, Independent?

4. How frequently would an individual school review be considered useful in terms of costs related to benefits? Who should conduct such a review? Should individual reviews be made public or only collated and analysed using a State sample? Is a report to the 'school community' sufficient? If so does this meet requirements for public accountability?

What does the public want to know about the education system — State and national

1. Understanding the context

In the opening paragraph of this paper is a quotation which states:

What is demanded is that schools demonstrate that outcomes are worth the dollar investment provided.

However any consideration of costs (dollar investment) requires an examination of how the funds are used — staff, buildings, equipment, programs. But making judgments about inputs, processes and outcomes requires an understanding of context. (Stufflebean)

In Australia the context for education has changed markedly in the last 20 years. While this applies to the formal system — schools and tertiary institutions — it also applies to the educative processes taking place outside the formal system — for example, in families and through the media.

When the formal system is being considered, many readers will remember a time when all formal institutions of education were funded and or regulated by the States with no input from the Commonwealth. (The two Territory systems (ACT & NT) were funded by the Commonwealth but the operations carried out by the NSW and SA Education Departments.) Even now the major political parties of the Commonwealth appear to differ about the role the Commonwealth should play in education. Ministers also, even when they belong to the same party, can differ markedly in how they operate their department.

The changes that have occurred and are still occurring in Australian society have influenced the type of outcomes needed by society so outcomes must be evaluated in that context.

It is suggested that the following contextual factors are relevant to any serious attempt to evaluate either the national or a State system of education:

(a) Historical/political context

Change is inevitable and education systems need both to respond to and to anticipate changes. Evaluation of a

system requires attention to how it has coped with past change and is planning to cope with future change. Any current atrtempt at an evaluation of the education system whether national or State would need to investigate the historical/political context.

(b) **Legal Context**

If accountability is linked with responsibility the legal context is extremely important. What responsibilities at any time reside with the Commonwealth Minister and what with the State? When national accountability is being considered is it a matter for Commonwealth alone or one for the Australian Education Council? The AEC is a body composed of State and Territory Ministers and the Commonwealth Minister, who was only admitted to full membership in 1972. Collaboration through the AEC is not only important for attempts at accountability but also for implementing actions arising from accountability exercises.

(c) **Economic context**

Some understanding of the economic context of the nation and of the States is needed for making judgments about resources devoted to education and their distributions to various levels — primary, secondary, tertiary and to government and non-government systems. Before making judgments about the output of the systems account has to be taken of inputs and to the question of how well the outputs mesh with the economic needs of the country.

(d) **Demographic context**

Before any judgments are made about the national system or that of the States the demographic context needs to be understood. Comparison of costs between States have to take account factors such as size, location, ethnicity. Comparisons of costs and outputs over time must take account of demographic changes such as migration into and within a State leading to the need for new schools and new programs.

(e) **Social context**

States differ in their social context and the expectations by their public of their education system. Queensland's

rejection of curriculum materials accepted by other States is a case in point. The variety of non-government schools represent differing values. Again, such changes as smaller families, higher divorce rates, and increased participation of women in the paid workforce, have placed new demands on schooling and can affect the totality of outcomes.

(f) **Technological context**

Technological changes, such as computers, can influence input, process and output. Understanding the technological context both inside and outside the schools is important in evaluating any system.

2. Understanding inputs

Much information is gathered on financial costs and how the funds are spent. Apart from the reports of the Ministers, information is gathered by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the National Board of Employment, Education and Training and its councils as well as other bodies.

If the Commonwealth and the States are to be held accountable for educational expenditures then Australia needs an efficient machinery to generate the necessary information. Does such machinery exist? Is the information readily available to the public? How should the information be presented? Who should analyse and interpret it? Publication of between-States comparisons is seldom welcomed by the States.

It is not the purpose of this paper to examine all the ways in which such quantitative data can be expressed in absolute terms or in the form of appropriate indices. What is certain is that various pressure groups in the community will use the information to argue specific cases - too much, too little, wrong distribution.

If the many reports from committees of Inquiry into education over the last 20 - 30 years at national or State level were studied it should be possible for educators and representatives of the public to reach reasonable agreement about the input data needed for accountability and to devise a method of publishing it regularly in a form which the public can understand. The USA has a National Centre for Educational Statistics that publishes information of this kind. The Schools Commission made one valiant attempt at this. In the Australian context

it would seem to be a suitable task for the Secretariat of the Australian Education Council to collate and publish the necessary information. A case can also be made for including some OECD information to help Australian citizens make comparisons with international data but the problem of differing contexts poses problems of interpretation.

It is worth noting that most of the key decisions and therefore responsibilities associated with input and its distribution reside with:

(a) the Minister and the Government; and

(b) the senior administrators.

With increasing devolution of responsibilities more decisions about less costly items are being made at school level. These decisions are important because they affect morale and process.

3. Understanding process

This is the area in which the public rightly expects the professional expertise of the educators to be demonstrated. Members of the public, especially taxpayers who pay taxes but have no children in schools, are well aware that more money is now spent on teacher education both at the pre-service and in-service levels compared with what happened when they were at school. New technologies — computers, video cassettes — are common. Support staff — psychologists, speech therapists, social workers — are available. Considerable sums of money, although small as a percentage of the budget, have been spent on educational research in Australia and overseas. When the increased funds (input) are converted into actions (process) the public expects to see increased output. But given a changing social context this does not necessarily mean more of the same outcomes.

In considering processes it is necessary to recognise that learning is not confined to the formal institutions and that external factors, such as the home and the media influence what happens in schools and the outcomes that accountability measures attempt to quantify.

Processes must also be appropriate for the outcomes desired. Stress on rote learning and rigid discipline is unlikely to produce independent individuals with skills in applying logical processes — a goal seen as important in a number of education reports and often mentioned by employers. Thus clarity of goals is a desirable prerequisite for guiding input, directing processes and evaluating outcomes. This clarification of

goals and processes requires dialogue between the public and the professionals.

Schools who communicate adequately with the parents of their pupils are likely to satisfy this group within the public about process and outcomes. Unfortunately for public accountability they are but a small section of the public albeit, according to public opinion studies, a more satisfied group.

Research has a role to play in understanding how process is linked with outcomes but finding funds to foster research and to implement and evaluate changes to classroom practice arising from research is a difficult task. Education is an activity which can utilise basic research from many disciplines but teaching being a practised activity carried out by individuals needs both field testing and action research.

Pre-service and in-service professional development needs to be valued by the public as well as by the profession. If the educators seek public acceptability as a profession it is necessary for them to communicate with the public about process and outcome.

4. Understanding outcomes

Expectations of schooling are many and there is unlikely to be consensus at any but the highest level of generality about the goals, aims and purposes which should be pursued by schools. Statements of goals are plentiful. Most of these lay out the general principles that schools are concerned with knowledge and skills (learning) and values and attitudes (personal development). (Karmel, 1985, p.68)

There is a danger of using an industrial metaphor to conceptualise the outcomes of schooling. Schools do not produce a uniform product in the way a car factory produces particular types of car, or a bakery produces types of bread where the unit for each type is a uniform product which can be readily quantified. Students are not moulded by schools but are active participants who help to shape their own outcomes. Student satisfaction is a desirable outcome in itself.

What then does the public want to know out the outcomes of schooling and what information can be provided at reasonable cost. Schools have an important role in communicating about individual students to both the students and their parents. If this is well done it may meet the requirements of parents - a significant public group - but is unlikely to be seen as meeting the demands for public accountability. In a changing society general competencies of the kind mentioned in the QERC report may be accepted as useful:

- *acquiring information;*
- *conveying information;*
- *applying logical processes;*
- *performing practical tasks as individuals;*
- *performing practical tasks as members of a group.*

(Karmel, 1985, p. 70ff)

The initial difficulty however is to agree on how these are to be assessed in a manner and at a cost which is acceptable to the public. What information? What logical processes? What practical tasks? What group tasks? Before assessment can be undertaken these general competencies need to be defined more precisely and agreement reached about suitable assessment instruments.

Discussion questions:

1. What useful input measures could be made available to the public re inputs at National and State/Territory levels? What use could be made of betwee- State comparisons, such as cost per pupil? What problems of interpretation and dangers exist from such comparisons?
2. Can the public gain an understanding of process in schools or must they rely on the judgment of the professionals? What consensus about process exists in the profession? How should major curriculum changes be (a) generated (b) accepted (c) implemented? What is the role of the public and of the profession in this process?
3. How would you go about assessing the general competencies outlined in the Karmel Report (listed above)?
4. How useful are statistical tables relating to progression rates, subjects passed at Year 12. Which do you think should be published regularly?

Comments on methodologies for keeping the public informed

1. Committees of inquiry

The Federal and State Governments have made frequent use of committees of inquiry and will undoubtedly do so in the future. The value of this method of accountability for the public depends largely on:

(a) their membership, including their support staff;

(b) their terms of reference; and

(c) the time available.

If the public wants the best results from this approach the following principles are suggested:

(a) Membership largely external from the operation of the system being studied. Self evaluation by parts of the system can contribute useful information but is not a substitute for external evaluation.

(b) Professional competence of the committee. This competence applies to the group not to each individual. Thus an economist or a business person could be very useful on a committee but a committee comprising only economists or business people would not inspire public confidence.

(c) Small rather than large. Once committee numbers reach double figures, communication within the committee is likely to suffer.

d) Appointed rather than nominated and with individual members not seen as representing a particular pressure group. Politically based appointed pressure groups are likely to be guided by self or group interest rather than public interest and commonly leads to cautious (lowest common denominator) reports.

(e) Staffing. Skilled and experienced support staff are needed to find their way through the system — not always cooperative and helpful — to provide the information needed by the committee. Some of the information

needed can be handled by contract staff and or external researchers but the committee staff have a vital role in collecting and interpreting the information.

(f) The interval between inquiries has to be guided by context but any period longer than a decade seems to ignore the rapidity of change. While committees of inquiry can be used to examine parts of a system, such as primary education, secondary education, teacher education, from time to time the public benefits from a look at the whole system.

2. Standing committees or statutory bodies

There have been a number of standing committees or statutory bodies which have issued reports which have an evaluative component and thus provided the public with information about the education system. Providing information at the national level were the Commonwealth Schools Commission and the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission. Both have now been absorbed into a new body the National Board of Employment, Education and Training with some apparent loss of those functions related to public accountability.

There have also been a variety of State bodies which have had evaluative and public reporting roles. A study of these would, I think, reveal they are not welcomed either by the Minister or the senior bureaucracy of the system and therefore tend to disappear or be muzzled and so fail to meet the public need for information.

3. Methods of monitoring and their difficulties

(1) Monitoring the context relevant to making judgments about education. Unless the profession understands the changing context, helps to shape it and responds to it, the public, through the political process, is likely to fail to provide appropriate funds, be critical of the process and demand inappropriate or unattainable outcomes.

(2) Monitoring inputs. It should not be unduly difficult to monitor national and State inputs if agreement were reached on what is needed. Information on finances and enrolments is already gathered by bodies such as the Australian Education Council and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

(3) Monitoring process. At the national or State system level it would be difficult to envisage any desirable methodology for evaluating process across a system. By developing better communication between the school and its community a contribution is made. Major curriculum changes need to be communicated to the public as well as to the professionals. Inspection is an unacceptable answer. The English system of inspectors has been suggested. Systematic school reviews and regular peer evaluation need to be considered. What role can consultants play not only in helping teachers but in communicating to the public? If the public sees the profession taking adequate steps in professional development they are more likely to be satisfied, particularly if they are satisfied about outcomes.

(4) Monitoring outcomes. When accountability is discussed it is often restricted to a discussion of monitoring a few outcomes. Such as literacy and numeracy - a simplistic response. However before examining specific procedures for monitoring outcomes (through for example regular testing) it is important to understand some of the problems associated with an outcomes monitoring approach.

(a) Measured outcomes result from any factors operating independently - home, school, media, community facilities, self motivation - so it is impossible to isolate the contribution of the schools. What has been the impact of TV viewing on reading competency? What effect does the language of the home have on literacy as measured by tests in English? Monitoring may provide weak evidence that specific interventions have made an effect. The measurement of the Head Start program in the USA illustrates this point.

(b) Monitoring outcomes, no matter how effectively it is done, does not provide information on how to improve outcomes for what is monitored. In economics, the cost of living index maybe useful but it does not provide an answer to how to reduce inflation.

We know about sex differences in performance but know little about how to change the outcomes. Unfortunately much of the rhetoric about monitoring outcomes assumes the process of monitoring will by itself somehow improve outcomes.

(c) The outcome measures have to be examined for validity. There are two questions here:

(i) Are all the important outcomes being measured? and,

(ii) How valid are the instruments used as measures of the outcomes?

Since not all desired outcomes can be readily assessed, administrative convenience tends to limit the monitoring program to a few selected areas. Even then the instruments may be of doubtful validity. What does the public mean by literacy? Is a short objective test of reading adequate? A test of minimum competence' may be useful for a particular purpose but unsuitable for assessing the range of performance needed for monitoring.

(d) Changes in context may require changes in the measuring instruments making comparisons over time. The change to decimal currency or the introduction of calculators are but two examples of the changes that have affected the assessment of numeracy performance over time.

(e) Society's view of desirable outcomes may also change over time due to changes in context, e.g. computer literacy, competence in a language other than English. This involves studying the balance of outcomes, not any single outcome. Do we need more engineers and fewer teachers is a question that concerns the public. Since time at school is relatively constant changes in time devoted to one subject may lead to losses elsewhere. In one State a change in methodology seemed to lead to an

improvement in reading but a decline in spelling. Is this an acceptable outcome?

(f) Some desirable outcomes take time to manifest themselves. Highly specific coaching may register what appears to be a desirable outcome for a Year 12 examination but not be a good preparation for higher education. Which is the outcome the public desires?

(g) The process of monitoring may influence the outcomes in two ways. The outcomes being measured are seen by teachers and students as more important than those not monitored although this is not intended. Also the test may not be entirely satisfactory for the area being assessed, but the test shapes the learning of the students. Oracy for example, if not tested as an aspect of literacy, may be ignored.

It is therefore important to examine carefully the benefits and the problems before embarking on any system of monitoring outcomes. The time and money spent on monitoring has to be judged against alternative uses of the funds (input) such as funding research and development — interventionist and/or action research — aimed at improving outcomes or on professional development of staff.

4. Some comments on specific methods of monitoring

(a) Examinations

The public retains great faith in statewide external public examinations but steadily this prop has been reduced. The writer sat for an external qualifying examination at the end of primary school (Year 7). In all States Year 12 assessments exist and the certificates are endorsed by some agency.

However in some States (Qld, ACT) the examination is not external but school-based with some form of moderation. In other States external examinations and school-based information are combined. The results are widely used in the community for purposes such as selection for tertiary education and employment. These are decisions which affect the welfare of society as well as of the individual.

The problems of comparability between performances in different subjects and comparisons over time worry educators, especially those with technical competence in measurement, but seem to be of little interest to the public. One frequently reads statements about public examination results which assume constancy over time despite large changes in retention rates. Nothing in their design ensures such constancy. The Year 12 examinations, however, provide useful information about the balance of the output from the schooling system. the percentage of students staying to Year 12 and the subjects studied are of public concern. The USA became very concerned when tests of the kind they use at Year 12 (the Scholastic Aptitude Tests) showed a decline in performance and their research has relevance to retention policies being pursued in Australia.

(b) Tests specially constructed to monitor output

Systematic national or statewide testing programs are costly and may have undesirable backwash effects. If testing is restricted to literacy and numeracy then an extremely limited picture of outcomes is provided. The tests used usually define literacy and numeracy in limited ways. The greatest danger is that the tests become the goal and define the curriculum. An alternative approach which provides and trains teachers to use diagnostic tests appropriately is more likely to help student performance.

The Australian Education Council began the Australian (now Australasian) Cooperative Testing Program, called ACAP, now carried on by the Conference of Directors-General, whose purpose is to develop and exchange ideas and materials relating to assessment for use by teachers. This essentially diagnostic approach can help teachers understand and improve the performance of individual students. This approach, if known and accepted, does not provide information for public accountability but would create increased confidence in the profession and lessen the information about outcomes.

Discussion questions:

1. If teachers made better use of diagnostic tests and reported results to parents would it lessen the demand for external monitoring? Do teachers and/or parents also need access to normative test information?

2. Would the testing of general competencies lead to serious backwash effects?

3. How often, if at all, should school reviews occur? What should be the composition of the review panel?

4. Do we need a regular national review or do State reviews (committees of inquiry) meet the public need for national accountability? How often do you feel such reviews are needed?

What can be done to improve the public accountability of schooling in Australia?

The interested public is heterogeneous with different groups espousing different values and having differing expectations of its education system. This implies multiple audiences evaluating the information. consequently mechanisms for accountability can supply only some of the information about schooling the varied audiences could use to make judgments about the system - State or national. What can be done, at acceptable costs, to improve the current situation? I believe the following are measures that can, and should be, implimented:

1. Improving the statistical data base and its analysis

The key body for developing a national data base incorporating information for the States and Territories is the Australian Education Council using its secretariat and working parties or through arrangements with other suitable bodies such as ABS and ACER.

The data base would need to contain comparable information on input and distribution of resources, on output in broad terms - retention, graduation - and desirably survey information relating to satisfaction of participating groups - pupils, parents, employers.

The public then needs critical analysis of the data (trends, between States for example) carried out by independent bodies such as ACER or higher education staff. However, the greatest benefit would arise if the media employed educational commentators comparable in number and quality to the financial commentators now employed and who lobbied to have the basic data made public.

2. Improving the system review process

States/Territories will undoubtedly continue to use committees of inquiry/review and this process is likely to be more useful if certain procedures became accepted.

(a) Regular - rather than ad hoc. A period not exceeding 10 years would seem desirable.

(b) External rather than internal. It is desirable for the review panel to have a majority of its members with no vested interest in the system. They can come from either outside the system or outside the State/Territory.

(c) Balanced and expert. A group which contains a variety of expertise and experience.

(d) Relatively small - Three to nine members facilitates communication and discussion.

(e) Research support. These researchers can be local and preferably know the system and its resources.

(f) Access to school review data. This could be handled by (e) above but if the system had its own school review system a sample of school data could be accessed.

(g) Encourage self-evaluation exercises by components of the system as input.

(h) Publish a report. Publishing first a draft before the final report can increase communication. When any national review is planned it should be organised by the AEC rather than initiated by the Commonwealth acting alone.

3. Operating the system using an r & d approach including publishing of evaluation studies

Major structural or curriculum changes, which will occur in any system, can be approached using formative and summative evaluation procedures to monitor the changes which occur. A lot more could be done to make use of research staff in higher education institutions for this purpose and benefit the system, the participants in the program and the staff of the higher education institutions who are engaged in teacher education. Publication of findings is essential.

4. Monitoring of outcomes through testing

Whenever ACER renorms existing tests or norms new tests it creates a pool of information about performance. This procedure tends to create few problems. Opposition to monitoring by teachers usually exists

when some regular testing program like the National Assessment of Education Progress (USA) is proposed. Unfortunately the public tends to see opposition by teachers as self protection. The public has little knowledge of costs, either educational or financial, and of benefits, often minimal. What then can the profession do to satisfy the public? Mention has been made of the ACAP approach which aims to improve the competence of teachers in assessment and communication to students and parents about progress. This helps pupils and parents but does not satisfy the wider public who want evidence that the system is meeting the needs of the wider community. The profession needs to propose a system of monitoring in which the benefits, which include public confidence, exceed the costs. What would be some of the characteristics of such a system.

(a) it would use a light sampling approach to minimise costs and backwash effects;

(b) the groups to be tested would be ages which made the data meaningful. This would probably mean once in primary (say Year 4 or age 10) and once in secondary school (say year 10 or age 15 or the last year in compulsory schooling);

(c) the tests should relate to general competencies such as those recommended in the QERC Report and be constructed in consultation with both the public and the profession;

(d) testing need not be frequent but must be regular to allow trends to be studied;

(e) at the same time as the output data is gathered changes in process should be gathered so that links between process and outcomes can be studied;

(f) the results and interpretations should be made public.

Because of the links between the political process and education there are risks for the profession in any monitoring scheme but the political risks of non-participation seem greater - less professional autonomy and a loss of resource.

Educators have responsibilities and must therefore expect to be accountable. But public criticism based on inadequate information will merely serve to make teaching less attractive to quality staff. Those presently engaged in schooling have a responsibility not only to themselves but also to future members of the profession to lobby for accountability procedures whose 'backwash' effects are not damaging to

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